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ABSTRACT

Excessive viewing of television, often late into the night, causes children to be tired when they come to school and therefore unable to do a good day's work. Furthermore, television fosters passive behavior, weakening students' ability and willingness to take active roles in their learning. Critics of education continue to attack the abilities of teachers, but the real problem is whether passive, inactive children are able to learn. Teachers are also being urged to make learning more interesting, relevant, and stimulating so that it will more closely resemble television viewing. The solution to this issue is not to exhort teachers to make school more exciting, but to limit the amount of television viewing by children. (SRT)

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Television and the School

by John Elsing

1986

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Charles E. Silberman, in his book Crisis in the Classroom, compares English school children with American school children, commenting, among other things, about not having seen in England the glazed eyes that he sees in America. His descriptions are correct, according to many teachers with whom I have spoken, and what he saw more than a decade ago can still be observed today. But it may be that he is missing the point when it comes to understanding the reasons for what he observed. He attributes it solely to the American school system, though what he actually saw can just as easily be attributed to the American way with TV and the other picture media.

Some television shows after 11:30 in the evening have a ten percent pre-teen audience; perhaps as many as sixty percent of the nation's school children are not in bed before ten o'clock. People who work in the nation's schools know that many children do not come to school refreshed. These children are not ready for, and are therefore not able to do, a good day's work.

The work that tired children do is perfunctory, not careful. It is not unusual to walk into a class and find there are many children in it who seem unable to sit up in order to write neatly and well on paper. The children are easy-going, likeable, but, when one tries to guide or direct them, they are often negative, out of sorts, touchy. Perhaps it is nothing so much as it is crankiness; more often than not,

they are tired. They lie sprawled across the desk tops. When one tries to help them to write or to read, the response is often a brusque "Why should I?"

Such behavior is so prevalent today that it is unrealistic to expect any teacher to combat is successfully for long. It is common to hear that teachers are suffering from "battle fatigue." Teachers simply cannot waste themselves day after day trying to get good responses from children who are unable to react well to reasonable requests. To some casual observers in the schools, the disdain of these children seems nonchalant, cute, "cool." Some misguided people have even labeled it sophistication. It is a sophistication of sorts, true, but of an unfortunate kind, for it borders on jadedness. These children are used up. They cannot contribute in significant ways. They "throw things around" but they cannot work.

It is now possible to say that America's dominant "activity," next to sleeping, is TV viewing. Television galore has an effect on the people who watch it. It would be unrealistic to think that a nation can remain unaffected by the dominant activity of its population. Certainly the school cannot escape the fact that we live in a picture-dominated society. Many children come from homes where the television is on almost all of the time.

Already in 1961, after careful research, the authors (Wilbur Schramm, Jack Lyle, and Edwin B. Parker) of the book Television in the Lives of our Children concluded that too much television norms children to inaction. This conclusion is still valid, for TV viewing is, as they said, essentially passive behavior. Television is something that is done to children. The children do not need to do anything in return. When they go to school after a full night of TV, they are not only tired: they are primed for passive behavior as well.

Many teachers are keenly aware that the television experience is a passive one. The practical knowledge of teachers tells them that TV is at odds with the goals of the school. The school is an active place, dedicated to helping children strengthen themselves. Too much TV does not strengthen children. On the contrary, it weakens both their ability and their willingness to take active roles in their learning. Many children go to school expecting that they will be able to learn painlessly, rather than by active study. There is often a conflict when a passive child meets active schoolwork.

Teachers today face classes made up of students who appear very relaxed. TV invites its viewers to take it easy and this is exactly what ever-growing numbers of young people seem to be doing. If they do not "get" something right away, their minds wander. If the work is not to their taste, they lose interest. Without the teacher's constant

support, they give up easily.

The result is that, in order to help TV children learn, the teacher must be right beside them, or they will return to inaction. As soon as the teacher moves away, a child often returns to the passive behavior with which it is more comfortable. Many children are quick to say that a teacher is "bugging" them when all the teacher asks is that they try to do wome work.

Of course, there have always been children who needed a push (gentle or otherwise) from caring parents and teachers. What makes the present generation different is that so many of them need pushing so much of the time. This is another reason why the teacher's job has become more frustrating in recent years. Teachers cannot constantly be reminding as many as two-thirds of their pupils to keep working. This destroys the teacher-pupil relationship, just as constant friction between parent and child erodes family feeling. As classes get larger, it often is not physically possible for teachers to keep up.

Critics of the schools continue to attack the abilities of teachers. I have taught for almost twenty years and it seems to me that the real problem is not whether teachers can teach: the real problem is whether children normed to inaction can learn. When the majority of children in a society seem unable to work except on an almost one-to-one basis, the society is in trouble. We must begin to talk seriously about the schizoid side of television and its effects on

children.

We are a people who have been conditioned by almost non-stop television since 1950. TV has exploited everything from war to children's books in order to provide the kind of excitement that is necessary for "good" ratings. It has provided almost no opportunity for observing that there is more to life than entertainment.

Now another generation is being trained by television to expect and demand amusement as its right and due. These viewers know what they like. They are easily vexed if they do not get what they want. They want something that will come on like gangbusters. As a result, murder has become a routine thing every night of the commercial television week.

Day in and day out teachers hear talk like this: Did you watch TV last night? Did you see where that guy got his legs cut off? That was cool! With competition like this tearing away at the attention of young people, teachers cannot hope to quietly engage the interest of their pupils. Many young people seem to have set themselves against purposeful, low-key learning. Excessive television puts parents and teachers "out of sight." It is no longer surprising to hear that children say they prefer TV to Dad. Humaneness loses when technology dominates.

Young people on their own private media islands can only be

reached by those who speak the high-impact media language. Thus teachers are exhorted to challenge children, to "turn them on." Those people who urge teachers to make learning more interesting, relevant, and stimulating are in actual fact trying to bend the real world of schoolwork so that it will more closely resemble the unreal (but dominating) world of picture entertainment. They are asking the school to try to match the TV kick. They unwittingly suggest that humaneness be judged by a technological norm. Parents and teachers cannot outrun television; it is an unfair contest.

Learning to use one's head can be as exciting today as it has always been. More than likely, when children are "turned off" in school it is because TV has them "turned on" too high.

The solution to this crucial issue is not to be found in hassling teachers to make school more exciting. The solution is to be found in cutting back on the amount of picture media that children consume. The school speaks for the long-term development of an active, inner excitement; commercial TV exalts superficial excitement right now, no waiting. The school helps children to be doers; commercial TV is anti-accomplishment.

The family and school try to address the young in calm and reasonable ways. Today this approach is often received with open scorn. In some ways some young people seem like members of a mob. They have been badly used by an industry that seems determined to enrich itself

at the expense of everyone else. As a result, children are tuned to fever pitch and seek release. Reasonableness cannot provide them with the "good feelings" they are looking for. So reasonableness must be disparaged. "Boring" is the word they use to cut it down.